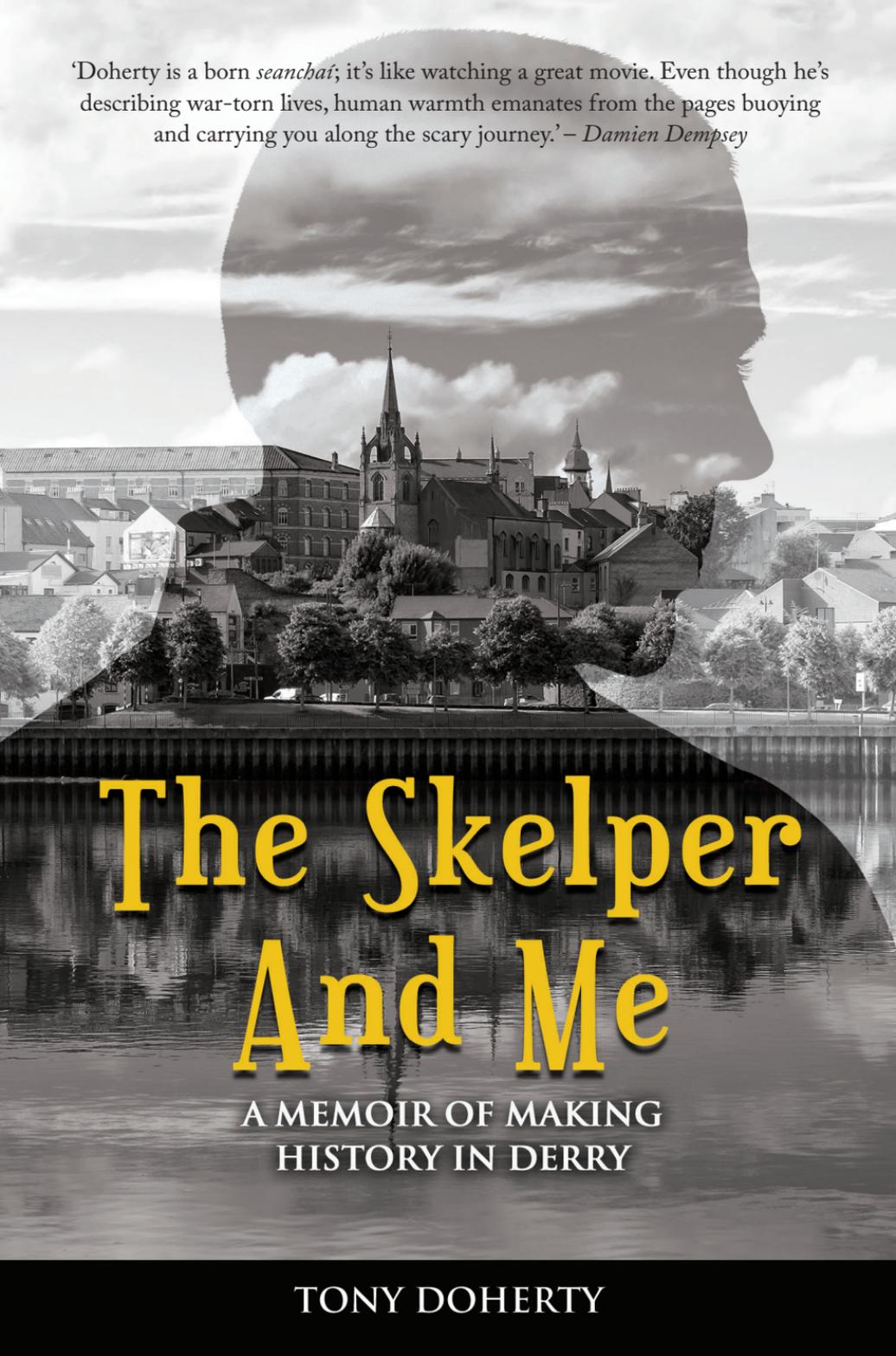


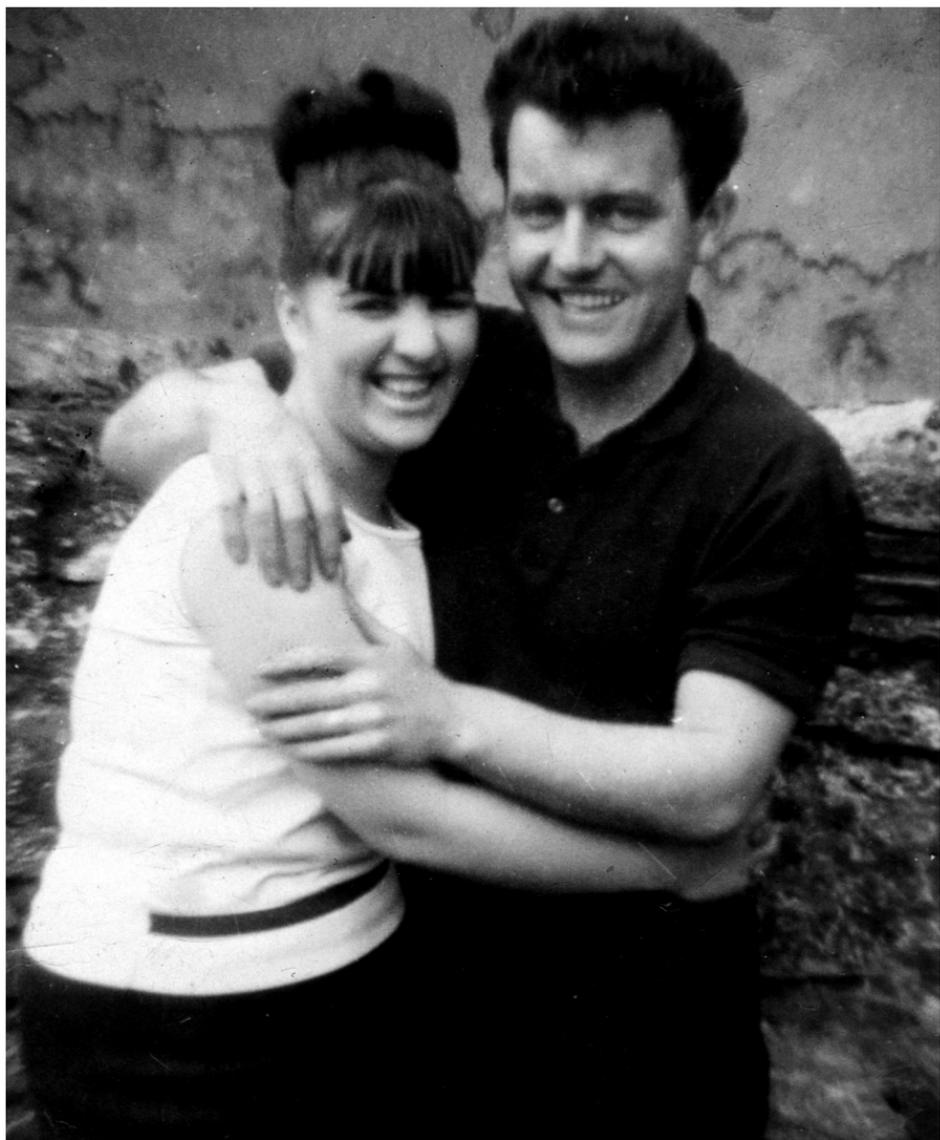
'Doherty is a born *seanchaí*; it's like watching a great movie. Even though he's describing war-torn lives, human warmth emanates from the pages buoying and carrying you along the scary journey.' – *Damien Dempsey*



The Skelper And Me

A MEMOIR OF MAKING
HISTORY IN DERRY

TONY DOHERTY



Ellen Teresa Doherty
(16 April 1942–20 August 2014)

Patsy 'The Skelper' Doherty
(21 September 1939–30 January 1972)

The Skelper And Me

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MERCIER PRESS

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Some names have been changed to protect the
identity of people in the book.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

People look at me strangely when I mention that Christmas 1982 in H2 ranks high as one of the best Christmases in my lifetime. But it was. In much the same way that the younger generation of the Doherty and Quigley family describe my mother's wake in August 2014 as the best wake ever. Had they been around for our Patrick's wake in November 1990, their opinion would be keenly tested. For me, it's the unplanned blend of people, place and circumstances that make such occasions memorable, whether about imprisonment or death.

My acknowledgements span two eras within the book; being inside and being outside. From the inside, my conversation with Figs in February 2018 proved both remarkable and invaluable. Figs is a shy and reserved man who won't take kindly to public praise, so I'll just say that this book would have been impossible for me to start if it wasn't for him. Others from Crumlin Road include the two knaves from the Short Strand, Glit Carlisle and Smurf Smyth, and Mickey and Jap, who provided the goods on the Sinn Féin doctor and Wee Hessie Phelan's 'escape'.

Conor and Declan Murphy and Peter Lynch from Camloch filled in many of the blanks relating to Christmas 1982, as did chance encounters with Kevin 'Two-stroke' Lynch from Donagh and Dermot Finucane from Belfast. Also Jacqui Maxwell, the Belfast punk.

On the outside, I am very lucky that both our Paul and Benny McLaughlin have the collective memory of a supergrass, as they were able to pick things out from the days after my release and help me join the dots. I couldn't have written about our Patrick at all had it not been for our Karen's painful recollections, backed up by those of Glenn, Colleen and my young aunt Lorraine.

My wife, Stephanie, deserves more than a mention, as the idea of someone, anyone, writing anything about her would otherwise be regarded as anathema. She too gave me great memories of our Patrick, the death of her brother Charles, and our life and times in Lower Nassau Street. On the campaign trail, I am deeply indebted to Robin Percival, Martin Finucane, Paul O'Connor, John Kelly, Gerry Duddy and John 'Baldy' McKinney for helping me piece together the chronology of events from the late 1980s to 2010.

In terms of the conceptual process, I would like to thank Freya McClements for her usual insightful critique of several early chapters; Dave Duggan, a good friend and the true architect of this trilogy of books; and Amanda Doherty and Mickey Dobbins for providing their periodic critiques and, more importantly, their unstinting encouragement.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge Paddy and Anna Walsh. Paddy was an immensely brave, kind and generous man, who provided solace to my father as he lay shot in the shadow of the Rossville Flats. Anna now rests in peace with Paddy. I am glad I knew them both.

Tony Doherty
September 2019

PART ONE

THRESHOLD

My story doesn't begin here. But here is where history put me. When I was a young boy I believed I was the sole subject of a secret but widespread experiment with the human form, and that everyone and everything around me was a part of it. Had I heard of and understood the words sociological or anthropological at that time, it would have been that type of study. I'd lie awake sometimes at night, convinced that, even then, at that moment, in the street-lit darkness of the bedroom that I shared with our Karen, Patrick and Paul, someone was observing me through the slate roof and making notes on a clipboard. Of course, for such a grand conspiracy, characters like our Paul, Dooter McKinney and Gutsy McGonagle would be part of it. Even the dogs in the street. And so would me granny and granda Quigley. And me ma and da. Everyone. I'd close my eyes, dearly hoping and wishing it wasn't true.

In the weeks after me da was suddenly taken from us, I believed even more that this whole life thing just had to be a weird experiment beyond my knowing or control, and that, someday soon, someone would bring him safely home, letting me in on the conspiracy. Those forlorn thoughts were in the darkest of February nights when I pined for him to

come back. I'd close my eyes and, before eventually drifting off to sleep, hope against hope that the study of me was actually true, that his killing, his waxy face, the wake, the hollow, hungry feeling inside me were just elements of the experiment.

After growing up and getting sense, I still wondered why it was me, or us, that this thing happened to. Was there something special about the Dohertys from Hamilton Street? Were we cursed? Did someone put the blight on us? Growing up knowing you've been part of a hugely tragic event marks you. You become known for it. It makes you a part of history, no matter how terrible the story. Are we marked forever by our history? As I grew older I often asked myself whether history had made me who I was, and would I, in turn, make history with that?

In January 1972 a young British Army marksman executed my unarmed father. He died along the same stretch of Derry road where he was born in September 1939, and where he was reared until he left his native Derry for England in search of work twenty years later. He was picked off by the sniper, casually utilising his well-honed rifle skills from a range of fifty yards. A single, crack shot. A 'Texas Star shot', as it was later described in a courtroom in London. Some say he cried out that he didn't want to die on his own, but the medical evidence suggests death was much more rapid, the SLR bullet traversing the full length of his trunk, severing the muscles protecting his heart.

Paddy Walsh, roughly the same age, crawled out from the protective concrete pillars of Joseph Place, eyes glassy

with terror, and whispered the Act of Contrition into my father's dead ear. A bullet from the same sniper sliced through the collar of Paddy's corduroy jacket as he spoke the hallowed words. Two Paddys: one dead and the other alive by a quarter inch because his head was low in almost silent prayer. Paddy Walsh was a fierce brave man. But he got no medals or commendations for his bravery. The sniper did, though, being cited in despatches, a huge accolade for the young soldier.

Hundreds of Irish heads stooped to the gutter as the bodies of men and boys slumped around them. In fear and panic the survivors dashed up the hill to Creggan, loud shots ringing in their ears, bounding the hard steps in twos and threes, and tramping the frozen ground to their homes in Malin Gardens, Dunmore Gardens and Iniscarn Road. All Donegal place names.

Doherty is a Donegal name too. It was originally Ó Dochartaigh but had been anglicised to Doherty centuries before I came into being in January 1963. I had just turned nine when news of my father's death filtered along the cold road, beginning in Rossville Street, passing the place of his birth on the Lecky Road, towards our house in Hamilton Street, that he had met his fate at the far end, over in the Bogside. A number of those who hurtled up the hill homewards, heads down, were soon to find out that their younger or older brothers had been killed too and were now piling up on the slabs in Altnagelvin Hospital in the Waterside. Thirteen of them: a butcher's dozen. A city in chaos, left to bury its thirteen sons, labelled by their killers, and then by the highest

judicial office in Britain, as gunmen and bombers. What a day for the Empire.

During me da's wake I swore revenge many times against the British. However, vengeance was not my only thought as my tear-filled eyes scanned the row of coffins stretching the full width of the altar of St Mary's Chapel. *Can we not just have him back?* I also pleaded. I could almost see him stepping through the door with his curled-lip smile and his speckled coat with the black fur collar. It was all happening so suddenly it just couldn't be true. But no, this nightmare *was* actually true. There would be no waking up in a cold sweat, breathing relief that it was only a bad dream. He was gone. I felt his loss each morning for long afterwards, in the gap between blissful sleep and awakening to the new dawn, knowing that he was gone for ever.

Eight years later, I took my oath to the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in a house only a few yards from where my father was born. The long war had already created its probabilities and certainties for those volunteering to take part in it. As I faced the Irish tricolour I was duly warned that my prospects were imprisonment, life on the run, or death.

A few months later, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) arrested me – the same police force that didn't think my father's death was significant enough to merit a criminal investigation. I was interrogated and admitted my part in an attempted bombing raid on a furniture shop in Derry city centre.

The metal door of Cell 5 clanged heavily behind me. I instantly realised I was in someone else's space as I eyed the resident prisoner for the first time. In effect, I had just moved into his bedsit. It was 1 March 1981. Anto had not journeyed more than a few hundred yards since the summer of 1979, when he had been taken from his home in County Tyrone, interrogated by the RUC in Derry and transported to prison in Belfast.

'Aye, it's a brave while OK. A bad year for Strabane town, ye know!' grinned Anto through his bushy sandy moustache, his kind, smiling eyes making light of the sheer length of time he had spent in this cell. It was almost two years! But he seemed at perfect peace with himself as he sat in his turned-up flared jeans on a single bed with his back against the cell wall. I stood rooted to the floor with my brown paper bag of possessions in hand. Standing up was all I could do to stall or challenge what was happening to me. It was far too early to sit down and accept where I was.

'Jesus! August '79! That's more than a year and a half!' was all I could say. It was truly hard to take in. I felt as if I had entered an alternate reality.

The year 1979 was when we got served pints of beer at the Rock Bar across the border on a Sunday, that I started doing a steady line with Maire, and that our Patrick came out and headed off to London to live the gay life. That summer we thumbed up to Malin Head with the Shantallow boys to Dessie Doherty's ma's caravan, where we ran mad around Five Finger Strand as the golden sands lit up the blackest of moonless nights. And that was the year my best

friend, Eddie O'Donnell, died so tragically young in an accident.

'Ye can sit down, ye know,' Anto gestured towards the bottom bunk. I sat down and contemplated my new surroundings. The cell was about 8 feet across and 16 feet long from the door to the high Perspex window that arched in tandem with the gentle curve of the brickwork ceiling, its mortared ruts blanketed and shadowed by more than a century of smoke and whitewash. A single bare bulb hung from a yard of flex. There were three black, high-gloss, metal-framed beds: Anto had the single bed, the pillow-end just next to the red metal door, and mine was one of the bunk beds, set at the back end of the cell, just below the window. Along the wall opposite Anto's bed stood a small table displaying an open brown bag of fruit, a stack of books, a bottle of Robinson's Orange Barley Water and two white plastic mugs. *Could I be here, in this one place, until 1983?* I thought. *Two whole years? Is that even possible?*

'Ye fancy a wee cordial?' he asked, getting up from the bed. He proceeded to pour water from a plastic water container, known as a 'water gallon', into the mugs, before pouring in a drop of the Barley Water.

'Ye want a wee custard cream?'

'Aye, surely. A wee custard cream would be grand.'

'What did they charge ye with?' he asked, handing me a brown bag of assorted biscuits, mostly custard creams and ginger nuts.

'Causing an explosion, possession of a gun and IRA membership.'

‘Did ye sign a statement?’

‘Aye, I did. And I’m a stupid fucker for doing so.’

Anto went quiet for a while as he sat sipping his drink. The custard creams tasted pleasantly sweet with the cordial. In our house, I’d eat a full packet of them with a mug of tea.

Voices, footsteps and the slide of buckets out in the wing echoed around our silence. This was C Wing swinging into action on the first day of the week. A key rattled in the door and Mr Kyle, a screw in his thirties with jet-black hair and a black moustache, said, ‘You’re to see the MO.’ I looked over at Anto, who gave me a thumbs up and said, ‘The MO is the Medical Officer; it’s just a wee check. I’ll see you in a minute.’

Mr Kyle led me out onto the bustling wing, past striped-shirted orderlies brushing and mopping the long, black-painted floor. The orderlies watched me as I passed but made no attempt to speak, nod or make eye contact.

The MO was a small Belfast man with a sharp, squeaky voice. He wore a white coat but had the pale blue screw’s shirt on underneath.

‘Anthony Doherty?’ he asked as Mr Kyle presented me. He pronounced Doherty as Dockerty, as most Belfast people do.

‘Dockerty; you must be another wee Londonderry lad with a name like that.’

‘Aye, I’m from Derry OK.’

‘Is that not Londonderry, Dockerty?’ he posed from his wee twisted face. The dual effect of Londonderry and Dockerty was annoying. Deliberately annoying.

‘Whatever ye want yourself. I call it Derry.’

‘Well,’ he squeaked, ‘young Dockerty from Londonderry,

you'll not be seeing it for a long time anyway, I hear.' He paused. 'Have you any medical complaints?' he asked when I didn't respond.

'My gums were bleeding when I was in Castlereagh.'

'Castlereagh? You must've been a bad Londonderry boy for them to take you the whole way up to Castlereagh? Open up and let me see,' he said. 'They're a bit inflamed all right. That's pyorrhoea that you have, young Dockerty from Londonderry.' His voice rose to a helium-like pitch with the excitement of the telling. 'It looks like you're going to lose all your teeth now, doesn't it?'

I'm fuckin' sure I won't be losing me teeth! I thought to meself. I loved me white teeth and me ma always told me that I was toothed like me da and smiled like him sometimes with my top lip curled up like Elvis. *I'll brush the hell out of them six times a day, if only so as not to give this bitter wee hoor of an MO any pleasure!* I thought as I stared blankly back at him sitting down behind his desk and filling in his forms.

'That's you now, Dockerty from Londonderry. You can go. Get yourself ready to say goodbye to your teeth,' he said as Mr Kyle led me out.

'Fuck you, ye wee bitter fucker. You and yer Londonderry!' I said under my breath as we came out, and Mr Kyle looked at me as if he should say something but then smiled and turned his face away.

The orderlies, stripped down to their white vests by now, were puffing and blowing as they pushed and pulled huge, wooden, blanket-covered buffers to shine the long black floor of the wing as we passed by on the way back to Cell 5: my

new home. While the buffing work looked really hard, they must've been glad all the same that there was only one floor to shine on the wing, the two floors above being restricted to long walkways of iron grids and steel grilles with a wide void in the centre. This void between the walkways was filled with metal mesh, presenting the eye with a confused tapestry of criss-crossing tracks, traps and tripwires.

When I returned to the cell, the screws had left me a white block of soap, a toothbrush and toothpaste, and a navy-blue bath towel. Anto was sitting up against his pillow reading a newspaper, and he smiled and nodded as I came in. He had his transistor on and 'In the Air Tonight' by Phil Collins was playing low.

'Well? Are ye livin' or dyin'?' he asked.

'That wee hoor of an MO said I'm goney lose me teeth; they were bleedin' when I was in Castlereagh. Is it OK to brush them in here?'

'Oh God, aye; just use that pot there. It's clean,' he said, pointing to one of two plastic chamber pots in the corner beside the door.

'So what's the craic the day, Anto? What do we do now?' I asked as I rinsed.

'The craic is, sir, that we stay in the cells all day the day until teatime, when we get out to the canteen. The loyalists are in the yard, so the marra we get out to the yard. We take turns at everything and never mix on the wing.'

'Where's the yard?'

'Out there,' he nodded, looking up to the high window set deep in the wall above.

'Is it OK to look out?'

'Aye. C'mon up for a jook,' and both of us knelt on the top bunk as he pulled the window from the top and it lay on the flat of the deep sill.

The view was of a triangular yard, hemmed in to the right by a high wall with rolls of barbed wire on top and kept in check by the three-storey sandstone walls of B Wing. The arched windows on each floor had sturdy vertical bars. The windows were all closed on account of the freezing cold. Despite the cold, though, there were around 100 loyalists walking around the yard in small groups, puffing smoke into the frosty winter air. Several of them looked up at our window as they passed but then continued on their triangular journey.

'P. T. Jones 121 for a visit; P. T. Jones!' came a harsh call from a loudspeaker.

'J. C. Dobson 122 for a visit; J. C. Dobson!'

'C. C. Campbell 127 for a visit; C. C. Campbell!'

'Ye see yer man there with the wee blue book under his arm?' pointed Anto.

'Aye, what about 'im?'

'He's in for beating a Catholic to death with a breeze block in Portadown. He's a born-again Christian now. He never lets the Bible out of his hands. Every time he's in the yard, he has it tucked under his arm.

'Ye see that big tall bucko there?' continued Anto, pointing to a barrel-chested man with dark, coppery hair and a red-white-and-blue checked coat with a white fur collar. He glided past our window, his eyes set straight ahead. 'That's

John Somerville from Moygashel outside Dungannon; he's a sergeant in the UDR [Ulster Defence Regiment] and he's charged with killing the Miami Showband. He's a bigwig in the UVF.'

Directly opposite our window there was a covered stand, like an open shed with a corrugated roof, where other men stood in clumps of threes and fours, smoking and chatting. They looked a bit on the miserable side, I thought. In saying that, the whole yard looked drab, grey and depressing. The only colour to be seen was on the four or five green-painted metal posts holding up the roof of the stand, and the array of blue jeans and coats worn by the loyalist prisoners. The leaden sky bore down heavily, placing a firm lid on the grey triangle.

It was a relief when Anto said, 'Here, we'll close this winda; it's buckin' freezin'!', and we retreated to the cell, which was warmed by two heating pipes running along the base of the back wall, directly underneath the bunk beds.

'I've never been this close to loyalists in my life,' I said.

'You'll get used to that, sir. When you're passin' them on the wing or on visits, just say nothin' and they'll say very little to you.'

'So, what do we do now?' It was a question I was to continue to ask for a few days until I got my bearings.

'We're in the cell all day till we get our tea later the night in the canteen.'

'Do they not give you dinner?' I asked, wondering about the gap in between.

'They do aye, but we're not takin' it on account of it being

the first day of the second hunger strike. It was on the news there earlier: Bobby Sands refused his first meal this mornin’.

‘D’ye know him?’ I asked.

‘Naw, he was long gone to the Blocks way before I came in.’

‘D’ye think the Brits’ll give in this time?’

‘Dunno; it doesn’t look the best.’

‘So, how did you end up in here?’ I asked.

‘It’s simple; I opened me mouth when I should’ve kept it shut.’

‘Did you sign a statement, like me?’

‘I did. But I didn’t do anything and I’m not in nothin’.’

‘So what happened ye?’

‘I was arrested out of the house out of the blue and took to Strand Road Barracks,’ said Anto, turning his face away, remembering. ‘I was never lifted before and by fuck, sir, they can fair pile the pressure on ye once they have ye in.’

‘I know! Sure look at me!’

‘On the second day next thing they were saying that such and such told us everything about me. I couldn’t believe it, as I just told them ye know I had done fuck all and that I shouldn’t even be in here. They were roarin’ an’ shoutin’ into me face and I could hear others roarin’, shoutin’ and cryin’ down the corridor. It was like a madhouse.’

‘Did the other boys sign too?’

‘Wait till ye hear. Next thing the cop said to me, “We know what you did, boy. Your friends have told us everything about you. You need to get this off your chest, pay your debt to society and get your life back.”

'I just said back that I didn't know what they were talkin' about, but they kept at it, shoutin' and roarin' into me face. It gets to ye after a while, ye know. Next thing the head cop says, "Do you want us to bring your friend in to see you?" and I said, "Bring him in if ye want; I've got nothin' to hide."

'So next thing the door opens and in walks this fella I knew from school, but that was all, and he says, "I've told them everything, Anto. I've got it all off me chest. You should do the same. Tell them all ye know!"

'And I said, "I don't know what you're on about. I didn't do anything so ye have no business givin' my name for anything!" And then the head cop said, "Young man, do you want us to leave you alone with your friend?" and I said, "Do what ye want; it'll make no difference to me."

'So, out the cops go, closing the door behind them, and there's just me and yer man in the room. And I says to him, "What the fuck are ye at? What the fuck are ye givin' my name for? I hardly even know ye!" And he says, "But I'm gettin' out; I'm a youth leader and I've an alibi for everything that I told them."

"Out my fuck! You're goin' nowhere, ye stupid hoor! D'ye not realise that? Jesus Christ, what did ye tell them ye done?"

'He says, "I told them I was in the IRA, that we talked about setting up a UDR man and that we carried out bombins in Strabane town centre. But I have alibis for all the times and dates, as I was at meetings in the youth club."

'And I says, "What the fuck did ye give them my name for?" and he says they just kept telling him that these other fellas were there, includin' me, and he just agreed. I signed a

statement the next day. I just couldn't take any more. And now I'm charged with membership and conspiracy.'

'And yous had nothing to do with any of it?' I asked, remembering my own battles in Castlereagh; I knew how isolating and, at times, terrifying an experience it was.

'There were four of us charged. All innocent. The other three think they're goin' to get off. Not a chance in a no-jury court. We're goin' down; the only question is for how long.'

'Jesus, that's really unbelievable!' I said, feeling a strange relief that at least I had done what I'd signed for.

'Well, there ye go. We're not the only wans in here that are innocent, ye know; there's many more,' said Anto. Falling silent, he rested his head back on his neatly folded bed pack of brown blankets, white sheets and white pillow on top.

'Will ye be gettin' a visit the day?' he asked.

'I dunno; I'm not sure what's happenin'.'

'Is it your ma and da who'll be up, d'ye think?'

'Me da's dead; he was killed on Bloody Sunday,' I said, going red as I said it, as if me da's death was a stigma of some sort.

'What age were ye when he was killed?'

'Nine.'

Anto paused for a minute and then said, 'Have you brothers and sisters?'

'Aye, three brothers and two sisters.'

'I've a visit the day wi' me da and me brother. They get the PDF bus up from Strabane. We'll get a wee food parcel later. We're goney need it.'

Anto had turned his cell into his home. Everything was

neat and tidy, and there was a faint smell of disinfectant in the air. He even had his house-slippers placed neatly underneath the table, and smiling pictures of his family on the cork board beside his bed.

I had only a few fags left in my twenty box. I lit up and sat back on my bed pack on the bottom bunk, struggling to keep up with the thoughts buzzing in my head. It was hard to settle on one thing for more than a moment before something else squeezed its way past. The draw on the Embassy Regal brought some calming order to things as I blew the white smoke up into the springs and mattress above my head. I wondered what people would think of me for signing a statement in Castlereagh. I did feel myself that I had let people down; that I, the son of a man murdered by the British on Bloody Sunday, should admit my part in an IRA operation. I was in here for doing wrong according to the law, but what about the bigger wrong done to me and my family, my city? Did that not count? What will Maire do? Will she finish with me? Should I just finish with her? What about her ma and da? Would they encourage her to finish with me? Probably, I concluded, but she's her own girl at the same time, so you never know.

That Anto fella's a hairy brute, I thought. He had pulled off his white T-shirt to put on a denim shirt with white, pearly buttons for his visit, only to reveal a mass of black hair sprouting from his gut up to his neck, the dark forest continuing the whole way up his arms and even across his broad shoulders! My chest by comparison was more like a desert oasis, a small pitiful growth in the middle of a sea of white skin.

A key turned loudly in the door-lock.

'A. C. Doherty, you have a visit. Come with me,' said the screw, a younger man than Mr Kyle.

'Stand down there at the grille until they're ready,' he said, pointing to the metal bars at the end of the wing. A few other prisoners made their way towards me before being let through with a screw as an escort, passing across the highly polished circle area linking the four wings of the prison.

I was directed to a room with a series of cubicles on either side of a central corridor. The prisoners sat on the inside against the wall while their visitors – wives, mothers, fathers, children and friends – sat with their backs to the corridor. Screws patrolled up and down, speaking at times in hushed tones to those in the cubicles. I had no idea who was coming to see me. I sat for a few minutes on my own until me ma and Maire were ushered in. I was delighted to see them. We hugged and then sat down facing each other across the powder-blue table.

'How are ye, son?' asked me ma.

'I'm all right, Ma. I'll be all right,' checking their eyes to see if they believed me but feeling very aware of the huge uncertainty of my new status.

'Everybody's asking for you,' said Maire. 'You're a wile popular fella, hi,' she smiled. 'Our phone hasn't stopped since last week.'

'Our phone's the same and the house hasn't emptied since ye were lifted,' said me ma.

'What's it like in here, Tony?' asked Maire.

'I dunno, I'm only in the door!'

'What's the food like?' asked me ma.

'Well, it's not the Steakhouse!' I smiled.

'Are ye in a cell wi' anybody?' asked me ma.

'Aye, I'm in wi' a fella from Strabane called Anto; he's been in since 1979.'

'1979!' said Maire, shock and trepidation on her face. Her brown hair was cut short at the back and sides but swept long across her forehead with a single cerise-coloured wisp cupping her face. She had a number of earrings in each ear, not just in the lobe but further up the edge of the ear as well.

The visiting room, fogged in smoke, hummed with awkward conversations and controlled emotions. It was a microcosm of the prison wing itself, where even the good or troubled news from home was restricted to cubicles and invigilated by screws. Crying children, laughing children, dressed for the occasion of seeing their daddies. Wives and girlfriends clinging to their husbands and boyfriends. Friends visiting friends with tales of the bar, the dance hall and the disco, and who was doing a line with who.

'Aye, 1979,' I repeated back to her. 'Hard to believe, isn't it?' and she nodded back with tearful eyes.

'Do think you'll get bail?' asked me ma.

'I don't know, Ma. It'll take a few weeks, I'd say, before I'm up for it. We'll just have to see.'

'We're goney go and see a few people this week to see if they'll do bail for ye. Me and Maire. With a bit of luck, you'll be right as rain for Karen's wedding in August.'

'That's grand. Sure we'll see what happens,' I said, preferring not to talk in certainties or get people's hopes up too much. It was a constrained conversation, speaking about the

unknown, keeping a brave face despite the possibility that this was as good as it was going to get for a long time to come. Behind me ma and Maire, visitors and prisoners came and left as their visits started and ended. In a quiet moment, as I lit an Embassy Regal, I heard a female voice in the next cubicle weeping in despair and then a male one whispering solace and reassurance.

‘What’s your cell friend like?’ asked Maire.

‘Cellmate,’ I said.

‘Cellmate,’ repeated Maire.

‘He’s dead on. He gave me orange dilute and custard creams. The luxuries ye get in Cell 5!’ I laughed.

‘God, there ye go; number 5,’ said me ma. ‘That’s a good sign; we’re No. 15 Brookdale and we came from 15 Hamilton Street.’

‘What’s that got to do wi’ anything?’ I laughed, as Maire looked on, bemused to see what the logic was with the number five.

‘Ach, ye know what I mean; it’s a good sign. All the fives.’

‘It’s not effin’ bingo, ye know, Ma!’ I laughed.

‘Shut you up! I know what I’m on about! Yer not too big for a skelp around the ear!’

‘So, how’re ye keeping, Maire?’ I asked, and could tell by her face what the answer was.

‘Ach, ye know the craic. I’m out hunting for another boyfriend,’ she smiled through tear-filled eyes.

‘He’d need to be better than the last cowboy ye had now, wouldn’t he?’ I joked.

‘We left ye a parcel,’ said me ma. ‘Tony Hassan told us

what we could bring and I left ye up some clean clothes too.'

'That's grand. We'll have a wee party the night wi' all the custard creams and cordial.'

'Stop you taking the hand out of yer mammy!' chided Maire.

'I know; I'm only joking. I really appreciate it, Ma.'

'I know ye do, son. Here, gimme a kiss now and I'll let ye's have a wee minute to yerselves.'

'Can ye do that?' asked Maire.

'I dunno. This is only my first visit too, ye know!'

The big screw came down to us and said that me ma could stand at the far end of the room near the exit. Maire sat forward on her chair leaning across the table and so did I, to spend the last few minutes closer together.

I could still smell Maire's perfume in the cell later, as the door opened for us to go and collect our daily rations, dispensed across a counter onto steel trays to be carried back to the cell. I followed Anto, who refused everything, only filling his white plastic mug with tea. It was with heavy heart that I sat quiet at the table in the cell to eat the alternative of cheese and crackers, while Anto sat sideways on his bed with one leg up and the other on the floor, mug in hand.

'Ye know, me da knew yer da,' he said.

'Aye?'

'Aye, he knew him from working in Du Pont. He said his nickname was The Skelper.'

‘Aye, that’s him OK.’

‘He said he couldn’t believe yer da was among the dead that day. Nobody knew until the following morning when word got round the workplace.’

It was then I remembered me ma telling us once that a man by the name of Maxi Gallagher from Bishop Street had called in his car to our house in Hamilton Street to collect me da for work at six o’clock the morning after he was killed.

I always found myself feeling embarrassed when someone mentioned me da, especially when they had just found out about him being killed. Even though Anto was clearly a nice fella and meant no harm, I found myself not wanting to talk any further about the subject. It felt really odd that both me ma and Maire were now on the road back to Derry and that I was here with nowhere to go. I was also worried that I was indeed going to lose my teeth, so I continued to brush them vigorously every hour or so, spitting the cerise-pink foam into the pisspot in the corner beside the door.

We spent the rest of my first day chatting and listening to the radio. Every time Joe Dolce’s ‘Shaddap You Face’ came on, though, Anto would turn the radio off, complaining, ‘It does my buckin’ head in.’ Anto was a reader, and he offered me a selection of paperback novels, but my head was too busy to sit long enough to read. He, on the other hand, sat upright on his bed, book in hand, as if he hadn’t a bother in the world.

The door opened and the screw said, ‘Ye’s have a parcel’, and both me and Anto walked up the corridor to the parcels office and were each handed two brown bags across the

counter, one with clothes and the other food. When we got back to the cell it was like we'd just got back from Well-worths with the messages. There was fruit, biscuits, cheese and meat wrapped in tinfoil and, for me, forty Embassy Regal. A buzz of excitement hummed round the cell as we put things in their rightful place on the table, as if expecting guests for a party.

Letters fell to the ground through the flap in the cell door. There was one in a pink envelope for me and one in a white envelope for Anto. I recognised the writing as Maire's, and Anto giggled at me for getting a pink letter. I sat up in bed reading the four or five pages of Maire's letter written on pink pages and didn't lift my head for about twenty minutes.

'Well, does she love ye or what?' he smiled.

'None of your business!' I laughed back.

'Was she the girl with the big guide-dog for the blind?'

'Aye, you're good craic, hi!'

'It'll not be long now till we get out to the canteen at five. We'll bring some grub out wi' us as I don't think we're takin' the tea either.'

'What do we use to write back to people?'

'Ye have to get up in the morning to request a letter when they come round the doors. If you're not up wi' your clothes on, they don't take your requests.'

'What other requests are there?'

'Ye can ask for letters, or to see the doctor or the dentist or the governor. If I wanted to take the hand out of ye, I'd tell ye to order a beef curry.'

'A beef curry?'

‘Aye, many’s the man was put up to ordering a beef curry for dinner or a box of Milk Tray or two pints of milk to the door. Wan fella even stood ready by the door with his togs and towel rolled up under his arm for the swimming pool! By the way, when we go to the yard the marra, if someone asks you have you seen the Sinn Féin doctor yet, ye just tell them to piss off.’

‘The Sinn Féin doctor? What’s that?’

‘There’s no such thing, but it sounds the part for boys just landin’ in. Just tell them to piss off.’

‘OK, I’ll take your word for it.’

Anto gave me his copy of the *Strabane Chronicle*, the first local paper I’d ever read or knew of apart from the *Derry Journal*. I half sat and half lay on the bed going through the paper page by page, though I was taking little of it in. I struggled to accept the reality of my new situation and wondered how Anto could be so at ease with himself, lying there on the bed reading as if he was on the sofa in his house in Strabane. I wondered would I be here in 1982, or even 1983? Never mind that, would I still be here this Friday or next Monday? How am I going to stick it in this wee cell with the fruit and the biscuits, the bare light, the pisspots and the screws looking in through the flap on the door every hour? How am I going to put my time in? Surely I’ll get bail in a few weeks’ time and bugger off across the border to Buncrana and not come back? Naw, Jesus, not Buncrana! I couldn’t bear Buncrana in the rain! I’ll head on down the country, to Galway or Kerry or somewhere. And what if I don’t get bail? Our Karen is getting married in August; the

first of our crowd to get married and the first of me granny and granda's grandwains to go up the aisle. That's in August – six months away. Could I still be here in the summer? Jesus, in this wee cell with nothing to do!

'Lock-up C Wing; C Wing lock-up!' called the screw's voice over the loudspeaker in the yard. Looking out the window I could see that the loyalists were ignoring the call and continued to walk round the yard. It was only when the screw repeated, 'Lock-up C Wing; C Wing lock-up!' that they began drifting in small groups towards the entry at the far end of C Wing to come in. Out on the wing there was a considerable rattling of keys, screws click-clacking or squeaky-booting, and metal doors being locked and bolted.

Sometime later, our door opened and the screw said, 'Canteen there.' I followed Anto up the wing as other cells were opened, allowing prisoners to make the short journey to the place of entertainment. This turned out to be much like a school canteen, with three long rows of tables, a pool table, board games, a small case filled with books, and a TV on a shelf near the door. High up on the TV wall a pair of eyes constantly scanned the area through a metal slit.

My cousin, Patsy Doherty, was in C Wing. His da, J.J., was in A Wing, as was his brother John, and his other brother Danny was in prison in Portlaoise. There were a lot of fellas my age and quite a few older. One was Seán Mack from Belfast's Ardoyne area, who heard Patsy call me 'Dutchie'.

'So, where did you get Dutchie from?' he asked.

'It's my childhood nickname,' I replied. 'My schoolteacher called out "Anthony 'Dutch' Doherty" one day during roll

call and the name just stuck. Apparently, he got it from an IRA man who'd recently been arrested on the border.'

'He was right, Dutchie; Anthony "Dutch" Doherty lived around the corner from our house in Ardoyne!'

I was introduced to Liam Hamilton, a ruddy-faced man with a shock of greying black hair greased forward and cut straight across his forehead. He was the OC of republican prisoners in C Wing. I also met Pete Ryan, whose cell was just across from ours. Both were from Tyrone. Pete was stocky, red-cheeked and snub-nosed, and wore short cowboy boots. He was the Intelligence Officer, the IO, of the wing. He called me 'cub'. At six o'clock the eighty or so prisoners gathered in front of the TV to hear the newsreader announce that Bobby Sands had indeed refused all his food that day in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh, protesting that he was a political prisoner and that the British had no right to treat him, and all republican prisoners, as common criminals. Afterwards, the hum of previously excited chattering gave way to whispered gloom and foreboding.

We were back in the cell before 7.30 p.m., the prison falling quiet for the night. Suddenly, however, a huge eruption of door-banging resounded throughout the wing, causing me to spring to my feet, assuming that a riot had broken out. Anto just lay there on his bed grinning through the deafening din and, after it had abated, said, 'That's the Tyrone boys and Big T's Country Club coming on the radio. They're mad about their country music. Philomena Begley 'n' all.'

We lay on our bunks chatting until the lights went out

at 11 p.m. Anto told me his granny and granda were sold on the same day in 1930 to a Gortin farmer at the Strabane Hiring Fare. His granda was from Loughrea in Galway and his granny from Dungloe in Donegal. They eventually saved enough money to take the boat from Derry Quay and settled in New Jersey until his granny came back some years later to Strabane with her children, including Anto's father, who was a car mechanic and handy with anything with an engine.

I recalled for him the childhood stories of me granda Connor enlisting with the 'Suitcase Brigade' during the Second World War and working in the factories in Coventry. Northern Irish men could only be conscripted into the British services if they stayed in Britain 100 days or more in a row. So, on their ninety-eighth or ninety-ninth day, they took flight for the Belfast boat home for a short spell before returning for another ninety-nine-day stint. Famously, when a nephew asked him in the 1960s why he didn't just enlist in the British Army to fight, as many Derrymen did, Connor lowered the newspaper where he was studying the racing form, pushed his specs down his nose, glared at the nephew, and scowled, 'Sure what did the Germans ever do on me?'

It had been a long day that had dragged on. *How many more of these days will there be*, I wondered as I stared at the brickwork ceiling faintly visible in the light from the yard. My mind drifted here and there before settling on a memory of gathering praties on Scoot Doherty's farm in Ardmore,

just outside Derry, with Kevin 'Boiler' Boyle and Conor McCloskey.

We were a squad of about fifteen teenagers, boys and girls, in five groups spaced out along the pratie drill. Scoot drove the digger in front of us, scooping spuds high into the air, which we gathered from the dirt, bagged and stacked to the side before he came round again to churn up the next drill.

'D'ye see now how Scoot got his name?' asked Conor between deep, laboured breaths.

'What d'ye mean?' I said.

'He's got a turbo charge in that fuckin' tractor o' his; he scoots up and down the drills like a farmer possessed,' laughed Conor, and we all laughed, but it was no joke either as pratie-gathering was nothing short of teenage slavery.

'Here the fucker comes; look at the speed of the hoor!' cried Conor in despair. And the morning had only just started! We had a whole day of this to put in, never mind the rest of the week!

Scoot's fields were on a slope, which meant it was difficult enough gathering uphill, but was sheer murder as we followed the tractor downhill, where we had to stoop further to gather the praties. As the morning progressed we became slower at the gathering, affronted before the sturdy Ardmore girls in front of and behind us. More often than not Scoot had to stop the digger at our backsides to give us more time. On a few occasions he even got off the tractor to help with the gathering, complaining that he'd have to bring us in a pair of specs each the next day as we weren't lifting half of the scattered praties. He walked in slow motion like John Wayne.

We prayed for rain, as only rain could stop the digger.

'Rain, ya bastard, rain!' screamed Boiler, his mucky hands held up to the grey-skied heavens.

'Aw fuck, please Lord, give us rain!' we pleaded, as we stacked the full spud bags to the side for collection later.

'Please, Lord, pish from the heavens on us!' as Scoot broke land-speed records on his way up the drills, with the objects of our slave labour, Kerr's Pinks, cascading with the showers of dry dirt through the autumn air.

'Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Give us rain, Lord!' we cried as we stooped our aching backs and bent our knees to lift the scattered potatoes.

And then, as if by a miracle, shortly before we were due to have lunch, it did rain. Scoot pulled up his tractor, looked up at the sky and said, 'It'll not last long, but we'll stop for the mornin',' and we retreated to the Walling House to have our tea and corned-beef sandwiches. The Walling House was the place where the gathered praties were separated into different sizes, the smaller ones being set aside for the following year's seed.

My memories must have merged into a dream then, as I drifted off to sleep.

I dreamed it was later in the day, after an afternoon of back-breaking agony worsened by the rain not returning, and the three of us sat on sacks outside the Walling House waiting for a lift back to Galliagh. A spud-fight broke out. Boiler dashed into the Walling House for cover, and Conor and I stayed outside. Boiler opened the Walling House door to throw and I caught him square on the nose with a spud the size of a tennis ball. The door snapped

shut and there was no sign of him for several minutes. I gently opened the door and saw him lying on top of a mound of praties with his hands over his face. When he took his hands away his face had turned into a giant pratie with sandy hair on top. His eyes weren't eyes at all but bruises, sad and dark, seeping tears down his face in clean rivulets through the dirt. And then his spud head fell to one side, rolling off onto the mound of praties and he was dead.

I woke up covered in sweat, thinking I'd killed Boiler with a mucky spud, until the mustard lights from the yard brought me back to the top bunk in Cell 5. I could feel the memory of pain in my back and legs as it dawned on me that I might never suffer pratie-gathering again. I looked down at Anto as he lay on his bed out for the count, sleeping peacefully through another night of his long stretch away from his beloved Strabane town.

‘The metal door of Cell 5 clanged heavily behind me. I realised I was in someone else’s space as I eyed the resident prisoner for the first time. In effect, I had just moved into his bedsit. It was 1 March 1981.’

From a young age, Tony Doherty has lived in the shadow of his father’s execution on Bloody Sunday. At the age of eighteen he found himself facing imprisonment, while the soldier who shot his father, Patsy ‘The Skelper’ Doherty, was a free man.

The Skelper and Me is no ordinary memoir. Embodying the old adage that ‘if you don’t laugh, you’ll cry’, it sallies forth as a fascinating and compelling story of prison life, making a willing inmate of the reader and weaving a tapestry of the lives of his young cellmates, whose existence played out, often hilariously, sometimes painfully, at close quarters behind the steel doors of Crumlin Road and Long Kesh prisons.

Upon returning to a war-torn Derry in 1985, freedom had a more liberating effect on Tony than he had anticipated. At his father’s graveside on Creggan Hill, he promised to make right out of the wrong. The epic struggle that followed changed the course of history.



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